

NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

NHS England and NHS Improvement



NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

August 2020 Monthly Report

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NHS England and NHS Improvement

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1 Executive summary

This report presents a monthly summary of diagnostic waiting times and activity across the NHS in England. This monthly report is part of a routine series of publications produced by NHS England and NHS Improvement.

The data presented in this report measures the current waiting times of patients still waiting for any of 15 key diagnostic tests or procedures at the month end. This data is split by number of weeks waiting and by test. The waiting times reported are for those patients who have been referred for a test, but whose test had not taken place by the end of the reporting period. Referrals may be from a variety of sources including GPs.

One of the main measurements covered in this report is the number and proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more for a diagnostic test, from time of referral.

This six-week diagnostic wait was initially introduced as a 'milestone' from March 2008 towards achieving the standard Referral to Treatment wait of 18 weeks by December 2008, but diagnostic waiting times now form part of the NHS Constitution. This gives patients the legal right to treatment within 18 weeks of referral (18 week RTT) and as part of this, pledges that patients should not be required to wait six weeks or more for a diagnostic test.

NHS England and NHS Improvement's planning guidance states that there is a threshold of 1% for this pledge. The financial penalty for non-delivery of the standard is set out in the NHS Standard Contract 2019/20.

The 15 key diagnostic tests included in this report are:

Imaging

- Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI)
- Computerised Tomography (CT)
- Non-obstetric Ultrasound
- Barium Enema
- Dual-Energy X-Ray Absorptiometry (DEXA) Scan

Physiological Measurements

- Audiology Assessments
- Echocardiography
- Electrophysiology
- Neurophysiology – Peripheral Neurophysiology
- Respiratory Physiology – Sleep Studies
- Urodynamics – Pressures & Flows

Endoscopy

- Gastroscopy
- Colonoscopy
- Flexible Sigmoidoscopy
- Cystoscopy

For detailed descriptions of each diagnostic test please see the [collection guidance documentation](#).

Some of the key terms used throughout this report are outlined below:

- **6+ Waits**
A count of the number of patients waiting six weeks or more for a diagnostic test at month end from referral.
- **Activity**
A count of the number of diagnostic tests undertaken during the month.
- **Diagnostic Test**
A test or procedure of which the primary function is to identify a patient's disease or condition to allow a medical diagnosis to be made.
- **Waiting List**
A count of the number of patients that are waiting for a diagnostic test at the end of the month.

A more comprehensive glossary is available in the Annex.

All England figures quoted are commissioner based. Commissioner based returns reflect data for patients for whom English commissioners are responsible.

1.1 National Statistics

The UK Statistics Authority has designated these statistics as National Statistics, in accordance with the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 and signifying compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics.

Designation can be broadly interpreted to mean that the statistics:

- meet identified user needs;
- are well explained and readily accessible;
- are produced according to sound methods; and
- are managed impartially and objectively in the public interest.

Once statistics have been designated as National Statistics it is a statutory requirement that the Code of Practice shall continue to be observed.

2 August 2020 Key Findings

- Diagnostic test activity and waiting times have been impacted by the COVID-19 crisis, and data for the current reporting period may therefore not be comparable to previous periods.
- The total number of patients waiting six weeks or more from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests at the end of August 2020 was 472,100. This was 38.0% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month.
- Nationally, the operational standard of less than 1% of patients waiting six weeks or more was not met this month.
- Compared with August 2019 the total number of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 429,200, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 33.7 percentage points.
- In the last 12 months, the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more at the end of a month has varied between 2.8% (February 2020) and 58.5% (May 2020).
- At the end of August 2020, the test with the smallest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Electrophysiology with 7.4%. The test with the highest proportion was Gastroscopy, with 61.9% of patients waiting six weeks or more.
- An alternative measure of diagnostic waiting times is the average (median) waiting time. The estimated average time that a patient had been waiting for a diagnostic test was 4.1 weeks at the end of August 2020.
- There were 1,241,100 patients waiting for a key diagnostic test at the end of August 2020. This is an increase of 243,700 from August 2019. In the last 12 months the total number of patients waiting for a diagnostic test has shown an increasing trend, but as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, the waiting list fell significantly in March before increasing again.
- A total of 1,532,600 diagnostic tests were undertaken in August 2020. This is a decrease of 375,600 from August 2019. Monthly activity has increased slightly over the majority of last 12 months, before falling sharply from March 2020. We have started to see activity increase as services resume from May 2020 onwards.

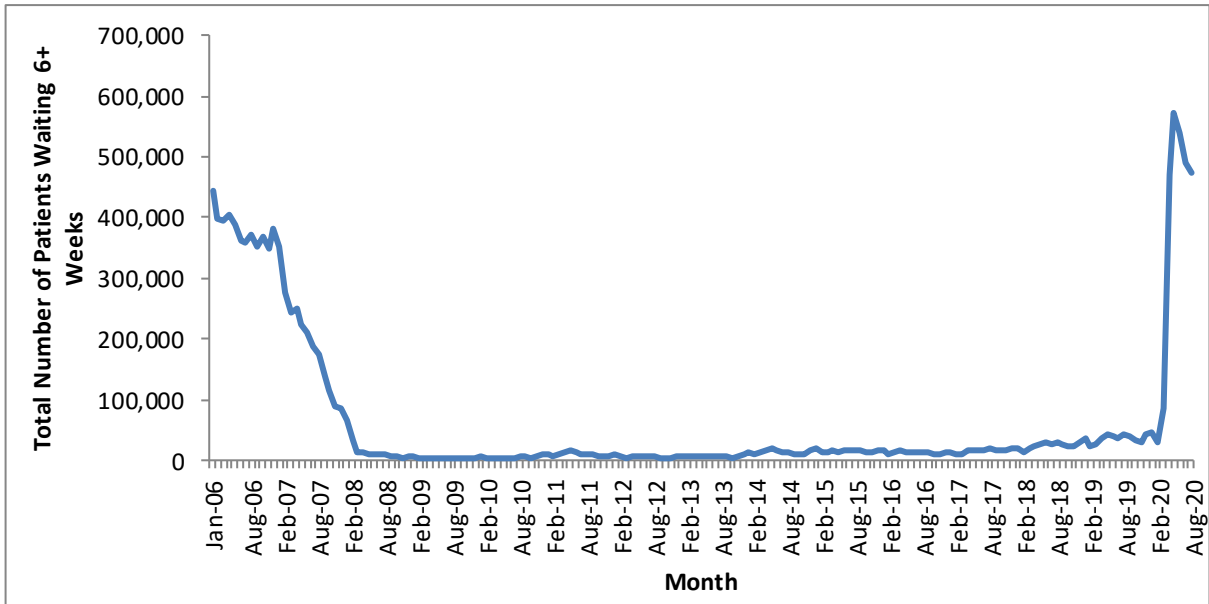
3 National Trends

This section analyses trends in monthly diagnostic waiting times and activity data that has been collected since January 2006.

3.1 6+ Week Waits

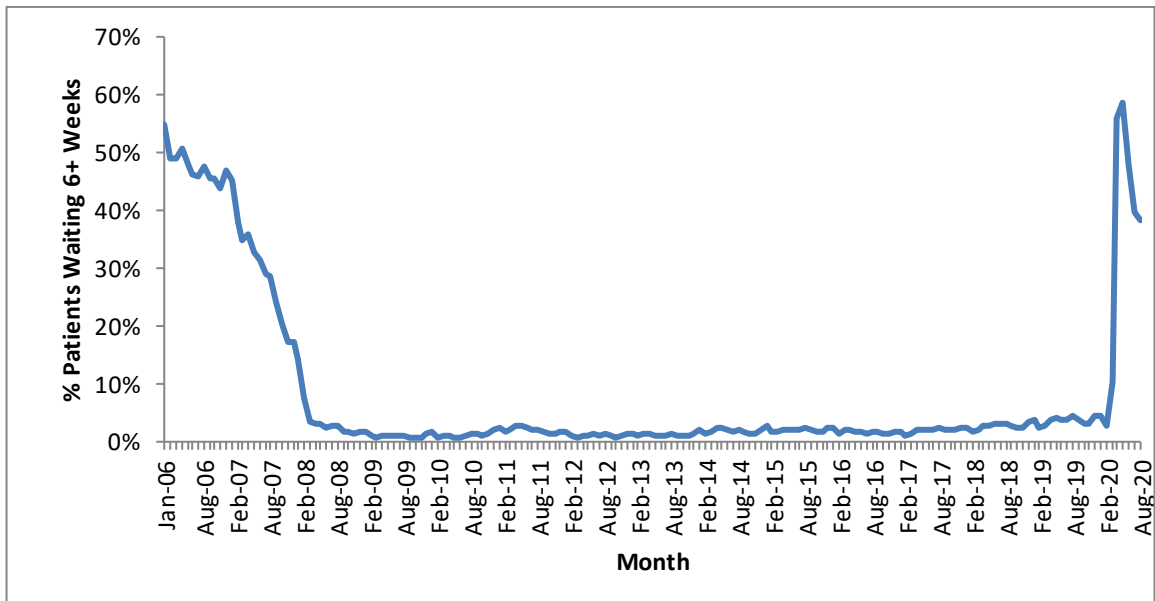
- 3.1.1. The total number of patients waiting six weeks or more dropped sharply between January 2007 and March 2008 (Chart 1). This reduction is most likely the result of Trusts working towards the NHS Improvement Plan (June 2004) milestone that no one should wait six weeks or more for a diagnostic test by March 2008.
- 3.1.2. Since March 2008 there have been fluctuations in the total number of patients waiting six weeks or more, with a significant rise between October 2013 and May 2014. The number of patients waiting six weeks or more subsequently continued to fluctuate before rising sharply in April 2020 due to the impact of COVID-19. In August 2020 there was a decrease of 17,600 in the number of patients waiting six weeks or more from the previous month.

Chart 1: Total number of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests January 2006 to August 2020



- 3.1.3. The proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more shows a similar drop between January 2007 and the 6-week milestone in March 2008 before stabilising (Chart 2) prior to the COVID-19 period. In the last 12 months, the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more at the end of a month has varied between 2.8% (February 2020) and 58.5% (May 2020). The 1% operational standard was last met in November 2013.

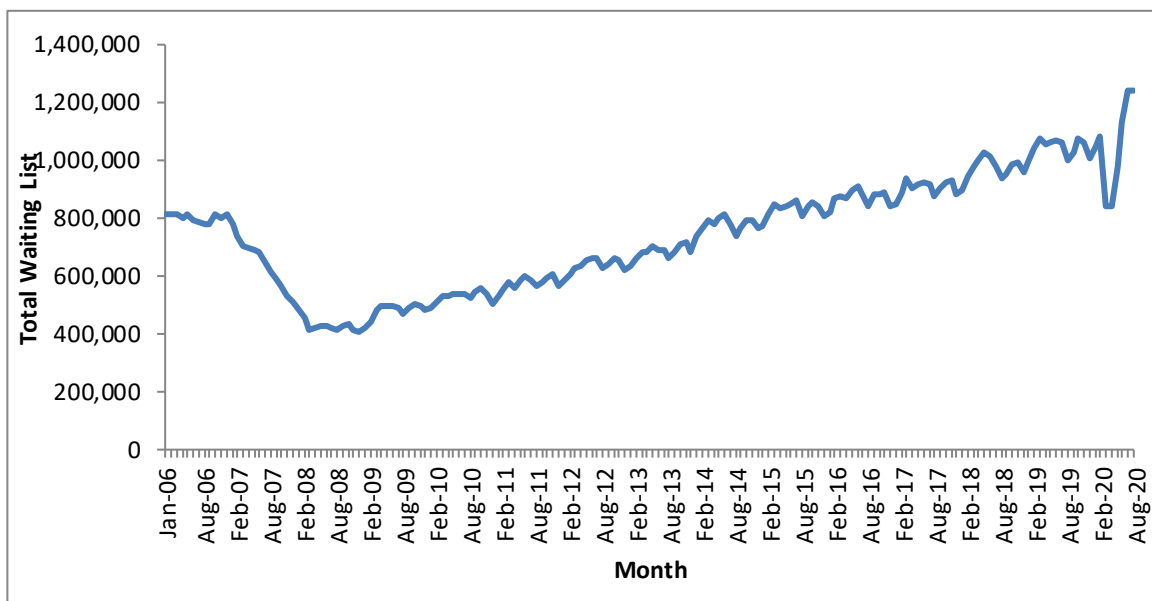
**Chart 2: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests
January 2006 to August 2020**



3.2 Total Waiting List

3.2.1. As with the number and proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more, the total number of patients waiting at the month end dropped dramatically between January 2007 and the 6-week milestone in March 2008 (Chart 3). Between March 2008 and January 2009, the total waiting list remained stable after which the underlying trend showed an increase before dropping sharply in March 2020 due to the impact of COVID-19.

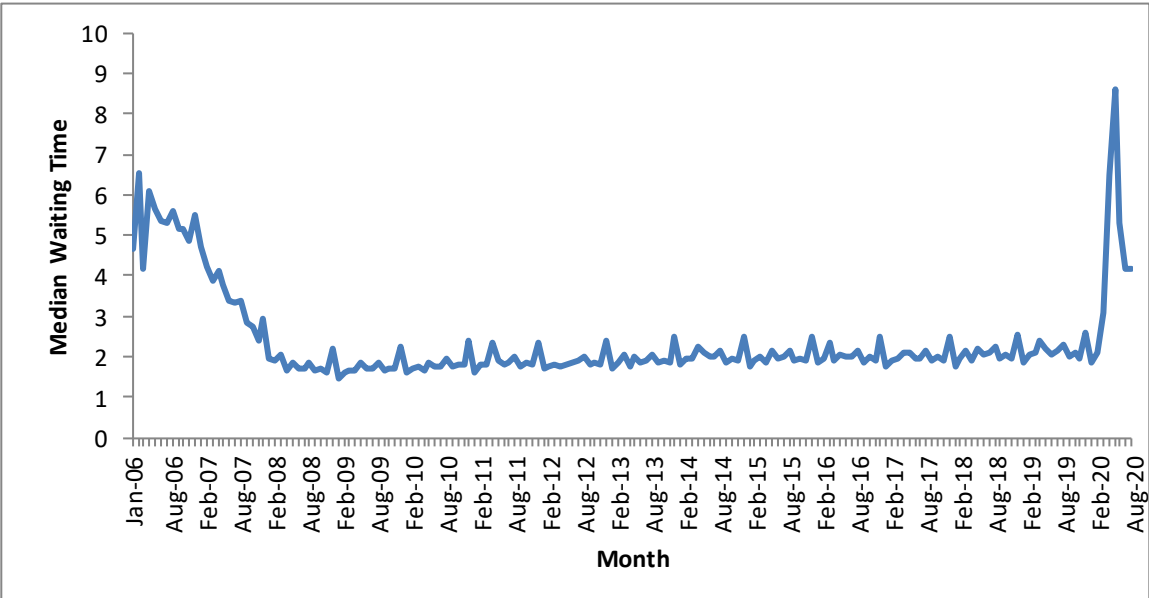
**Chart 3: Total number of patients waiting at month end for all tests
January 2006 to August 2020**



3.3 Median Waiting Time

3.3.1. The average (median) waiting time displays a similar trend to the total waiting list and 6 weeks or more waits. After a rapid decrease in the first two years leading to the 6-week milestone, the median waiting time remained stable until the COVID-19 period (Chart 4). The data shows significant increases during December every year, as a result of the increased number of bank holidays and resulting staff shortages. In the last 12 months, the median waiting time had a high of 8.6 weeks (May 2020) and a low of 1.9 weeks (January 2020). The median waiting time in August 2020 was 4.1 weeks.

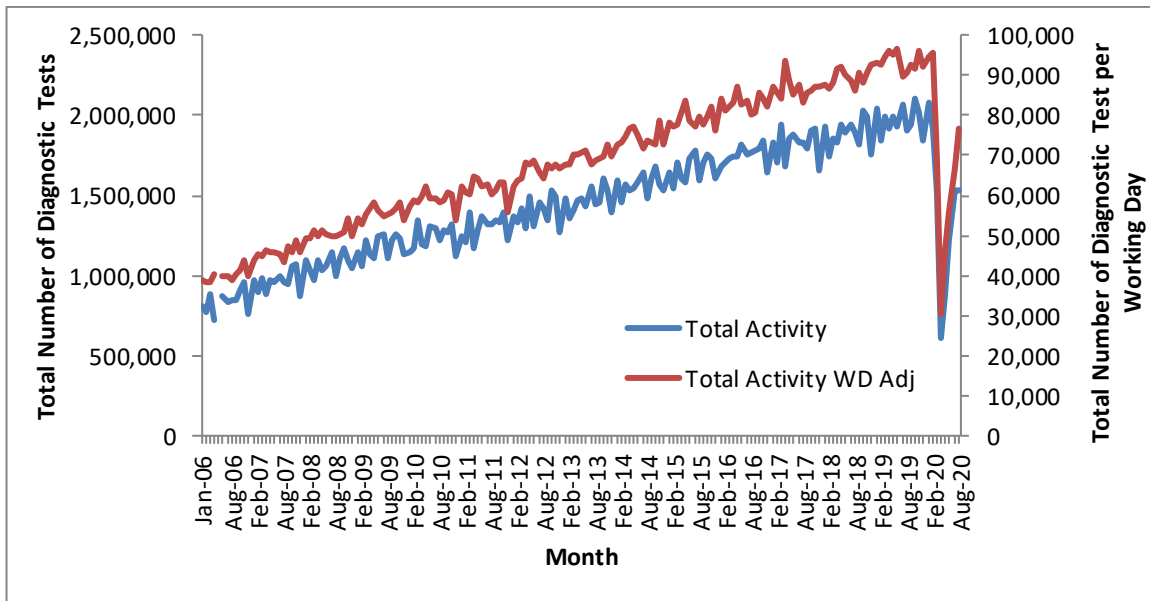
Chart 4: Median waiting time for all tests – January 2006 to August 2020



3.4 Total Activity

- 3.4.1. The monthly activity figure can fluctuate significantly month to month, with particularly notable decreases in December due to the bank holidays. However, the underlying trend has shown an increase since January 2006 until the COVID-19 period. If the data is adjusted to show activity per working day, the monthly variation becomes less pronounced (Chart 5).
- 3.4.2. Monthly activity decreased markedly following the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Total activity in April 2020 fell by 68% compared to February 2020 but has subsequently started to recover.

Chart 5: Total activity and working day adjusted activity per month for all tests January 2006 to August 2020



Note: Activity data was not collected in May 2006 and all activity time series graphs will show missing values for that month

3.4.3. In the previous 12 months, individual tests have shown differing changes in activity. The test with the smallest decrease in activity was CT, where August 2020 activity was 0.2% lower than in August 2019. The test with the largest reduction in activity was Electrophysiology, where August 2020 activity was 11.4% lower than in August 2019 (Table 1).

Table 1: Total activity, by test – August 2019 and August 2020

	Aug-19	Aug-20	Average monthly growth
MRI	304,269	250,680	-1.6%
CT	520,865	509,329	-0.2%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	618,954	469,218	-2.3%
Barium Enema	3,140	2,653	-1.4%
Dexa Scan	38,636	25,439	-3.4%
Audiology Assessments	101,184	49,722	-5.7%
Echocardiography	132,338	101,885	-2.2%
Electrophysiology	2,078	487	-11.4%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	17,993	12,909	-2.7%
Sleep Studies	10,370	6,803	-3.5%
Urodynamics	6,486	3,584	-4.8%
Colonoscopy	45,920	32,163	-2.9%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	25,886	13,401	-5.3%
Cystoscopy	23,868	18,733	-2.0%
Gastroscopy	56,216	35,637	-3.7%
All Tests	1,908,203	1,532,643	-1.8%

4 August 2020 Data

This section analyses the August 2020 diagnostic waiting times and activity data, and includes comparisons between tests, area teams, providers and commissioners.

6+ week waits performance was significantly worse in March, April and May 2020 due to the impact of the COVID-19 crisis, but this has started to improve in June.

4.1 6+ Week Waits

- 4.1.1. At the end of August 2020, there were a total of 472,100 patients waiting six weeks or more from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests. This was 38.0% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month.
- 4.1.2. Compared with August 2019, the number of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 429,200, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 33.7 percentage points.
- 4.1.3. Compared with August 2019, the test with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Gastroscopy, which increased by 51.6 percentage points. The test with the smallest increase was Electrophysiology, which increased by 5.9 percentage points (Table 2).

Table 2: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test – August 2019 and August 2020

	Aug-19	Aug-20	Difference (%age points)
MRI	2.5%	28.1%	25.5
CT	3.1%	28.8%	25.7
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	2.8%	27.9%	25.1
Barium Enema	2.7%	21.8%	19.1
Dexa Scan	1.0%	48.0%	47.0
Audiology Assessments	2.1%	52.4%	50.3
Echocardiography	7.6%	46.5%	38.9
Electrophysiology	1.4%	7.4%	5.9
Peripheral Neurophysiology	5.3%	50.3%	45.0
Sleep Studies	7.8%	50.7%	42.9
Urodynamics	16.9%	61.7%	44.8
Colonoscopy	12.9%	58.0%	45.1
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	11.7%	61.3%	49.6
Cystoscopy	9.0%	50.2%	41.2
Gastroscopy	10.3%	61.9%	51.6
All Tests	4.3%	38.0%	33.7

Note: Figures may differ due to rounding.

4.1.4. Compared with August 2019, the test type with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Endoscopy with an increase of 48.0 percentage points. Physiological Measurement increased by 43.1 percentage points, while Imaging increased by 26.7 percentage points (Table 3). See section 5.4 for which tests are included under the different test types.

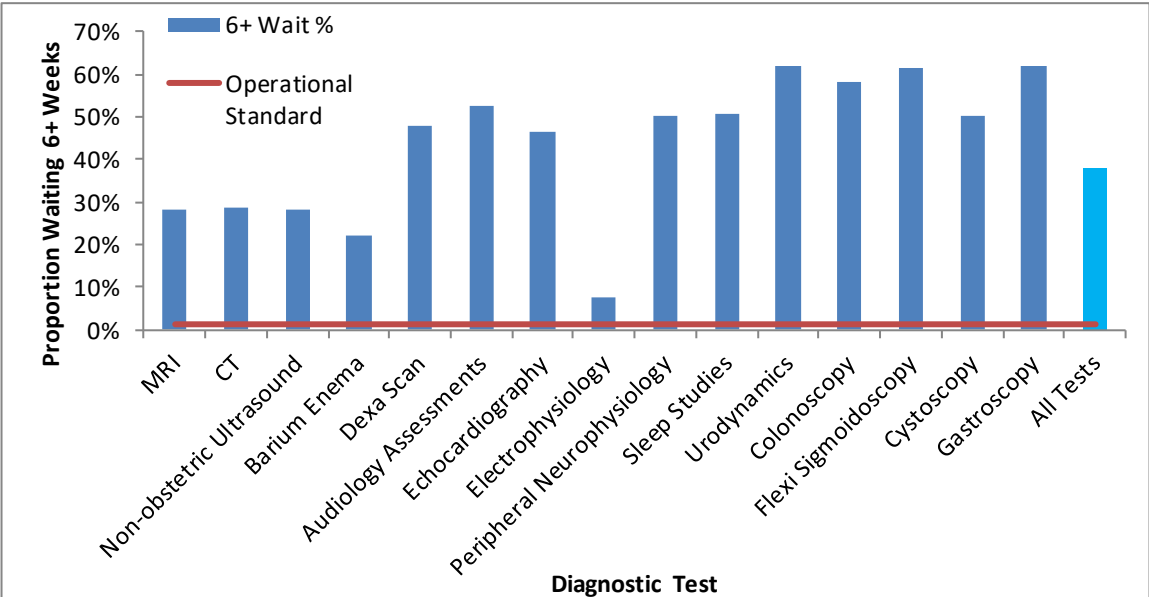
Table 3: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test type – August 2019 and August 2020

	Aug-19	Aug-20	Difference (%age points)
Imaging	2.7%	29.4%	26.7
Physiological Measurement	6.0%	49.1%	43.1
Endoscopy	11.3%	59.2%	48.0
Total	4.3%	38.0%	33.7

Note: Figures may differ due to rounding.

4.1.5. The operational standard that less than 1% of patients should wait six weeks or more from referral for a diagnostic test was met in none of the 15 key tests this month. The test with the lowest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Electrophysiology (7.4%), whilst the test with the highest proportion was Gastroscopy (61.9%) (Chart 6).

Chart 6: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test – August 2020



4.1.6. 141 of the 143 acute trusts that submitted data for August 2020 failed to meet the 1% operational standard.

- 4.1.7. All 135 Commissioners¹ failed to meet the 1% operational standard.
- 4.1.8. None of the seven NHS England and NHS Improvement Regional Teams met the 1% operational standard. The proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more for a diagnostic test varied by region between 31.5% (South East) and 42.2% (North West) (Table 4).
- 4.1.9. Feedback from NHS trusts has indicated that variations can exist between different regions due to a variety of reasons, from machines breaking down to staff shortages in trusts that usually only affect one area region.

Table 4: August 2020 Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity by Regional Team*

Region	Number of patients waiting six weeks or more at month end	Percentage of patients waiting six weeks or more at month end	Total number of patients waiting at month end	Total activity undertaken in month	Median waiting time
London	76,087	36.4%	209,143	249,381	4.0
South West	40,777	37.0%	110,355	150,832	4.0
South East	50,076	31.5%	159,107	232,798	3.4
Midlands	93,374	39.8%	234,864	279,110	4.4
East of England	62,515	40.9%	152,825	171,138	4.5
North West	78,238	42.2%	185,532	204,524	4.7
North East and Yorkshire	70,242	37.6%	186,714	236,273	4.0
England	471,309	38.1%	1,238,540	1,524,056	4.2

*Includes all independent sector providers.

¹ Includes NHS England and NHS Improvement

4.2 Total Waiting List

- 4.2.1. At the end of August 2020 there were a total of 1,241,100 patients still waiting for a diagnostic test. This is an increase of 243,700 (24.4%) from August 2019.
- 4.2.2. The test with the largest waiting list was Non-obstetric Ultrasound, which accounted for 32.7% of the total waiting list, or 405,800 patients. The test with the smallest waiting list was Electrophysiology, which accounted for 0.04% of the total waiting list, or 500 patients (Table 5).

Table 5: Total number of patients waiting at month end, by test – August 2019 and August 2020

	Aug-19	Aug-20	Growth (%age)
MRI	188,326	199,549	6.0%
CT	127,218	148,577	16.8%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	363,000	405,779	11.8%
Barium Enema	1,711	1,796	5.0%
Dexa Scan	31,310	52,864	68.8%
Audiology Assessments	44,842	53,610	19.6%
Echocardiography	82,181	116,730	42.0%
Electrophysiology	1,210	476	-60.7%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	20,325	27,251	34.1%
Sleep Studies	9,413	11,416	21.3%
Urodynamics	4,531	7,388	63.1%
Colonoscopy	44,388	73,917	66.5%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	19,082	31,357	64.3%
Cystoscopy	14,582	22,700	55.7%
Gastroscopy	45,297	87,685	93.6%
All Tests	997,416	1,241,095	24.4%

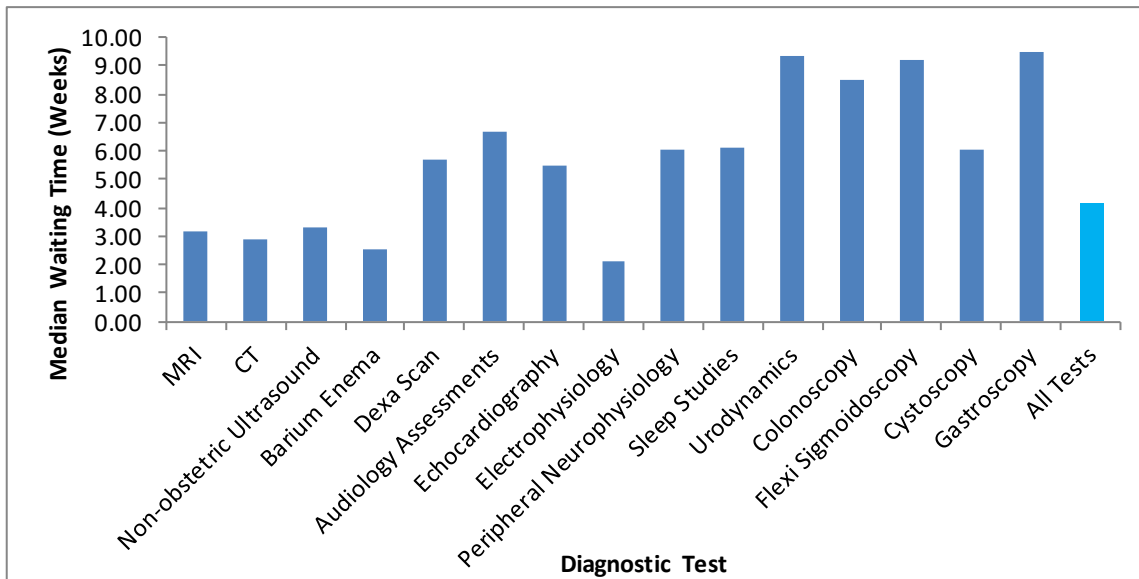
Note: Barium Enema is a test that should be replaced by Colonoscopy or CT Colonography, so the number of tests undertaken should be reducing.

- 4.2.3. The largest increase in the number of patients waiting by test has been for Gastroscopy, where the waiting list grew by 93.6% compared with August 2019. The largest decrease in the number of patients waiting by test has been for Electrophysiology, where the waiting list reduced by 60.7%

4.3 Median Waiting Times

- 4.3.1. At the end of August 2020, the estimated median waiting time for all 15 diagnostic tests was 4.1 weeks from the time of referral, down from 4.2 weeks in the previous month. The tests with the shortest median waiting times were Electrophysiology at 2.1 weeks. The test with the longest median waiting time was Gastroscopy at 9.5 weeks (Chart 7).

Chart 7: Median waiting time by test – August 2020



4.4 Total Activity

- 4.4.1. In total 1,532,600 of the 15 key diagnostic tests were performed during August 2020. This is a decrease of 375,600 (19.7%) from August 2019 (Table 6).
- 4.4.2. The test with the highest activity was CT with 509,300 tests taking place. This accounted for 33.2% of all activity in August 2020. The test with the lowest activity was Electrophysiology with 500 tests taking place. This accounted for 0.03% of all activity this month.
- 4.4.3. The number of tests conducted over the last 12 months has decreased by 17.6% from the same period last year (a decrease of 17.9% when adjusted for working days).

Table 6: Total activity and growth, by test – August 2019 and August 2020

	Aug-20	Aug-19	YTD 20/21	YTD 19/20	Growth Aug 20 vs Aug 19	Growth YTD 20/21 vs YTD 19/20	Adjusted Growth Aug 20 vs Aug 19	Adjusted Growth YTD 20/21 vs YTD 19/20
MRI	250,680	304,269	925,438	1,531,221	-17.6%	-39.6%	-13.5%	-39.0%
CT	509,329	520,865	2,139,622	2,618,553	-2.2%	-18.3%	2.7%	-17.5%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	469,218	618,954	1,732,459	3,253,460	-24.2%	-46.8%	-20.4%	-46.2%
Barium Enema	2,653	3,140	9,954	15,461	-15.5%	-35.6%	-11.3%	-35.0%
Dexa Scan	25,439	38,636	61,935	200,740	-34.2%	-69.1%	-30.9%	-68.8%
Audiology Assessments	49,722	101,184	152,095	534,248	-50.9%	-71.5%	-48.4%	-71.3%
Echocardiography	101,885	132,338	381,459	688,063	-23.0%	-44.6%	-19.2%	-44.0%
Electrophysiology	487	2,078	2,206	11,497	-76.6%	-80.8%	-75.4%	-80.6%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	12,909	17,993	37,203	96,356	-28.3%	-61.4%	-24.7%	-61.0%
Sleep Studies	6,803	10,370	21,711	53,016	-34.4%	-59.0%	-31.1%	-58.7%
Urodynamics	3,584	6,486	10,193	33,974	-44.7%	-70.0%	-42.0%	-69.7%
Colonoscopy	32,163	45,920	90,335	227,783	-30.0%	-60.3%	-26.5%	-60.0%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	13,401	25,886	38,332	132,203	-48.2%	-71.0%	-45.6%	-70.7%
Cystoscopy	18,733	23,868	70,065	126,855	-21.5%	-44.8%	-17.6%	-44.2%
Gastroscopy	35,637	56,216	101,675	292,198	-36.6%	-65.2%	-33.4%	-64.9%
All Tests	1,532,643	1,908,203	5,774,682	9,815,628	-19.7%	-41.2%	-15.7%	-40.6%

Note: Barium Enema is a test that should be replaced by Colonoscopy or CT Colonography, so the number of tests undertaken should be reducing.

5 Annex

5.1 Methodology

5.1.1. NHS England and NHS Improvement compiles diagnostic waiting time and activity data through a central return. Data collected includes:

- The number of patients waiting at the month end, split by test and week.
- Total activity classified as either Waiting List tests (excluding planned), Planned tests, or Unscheduled tests.

5.1.2. Providers submit data to NHS England and NHS Improvement via SDCS where it is checked and signed off by commissioners. For further details on how the data is collected and the SDCS system, please refer to the [NHSE Collection Guidance](#).

5.2 Data Revisions

5.2.1. Revisions to published figures are released on a six-monthly basis and in accordance with the NHS England's revision policy. For more information on the revision policy please refer to the [SDCS Revisions Policy Document](#).

Revisions were last published in April 2020 for the months July 2019 through to December 2019.

5.3 Data Availability

5.3.1. Monthly diagnostic waiting time and activity data is published on a monthly timetable. [A full calendar of all statistical publications can be found here.](#)

5.4 Glossary

Area Team

A geographical area of NHS England and NHS Improvement with direct commissioning responsibilities for GP services, dental services, pharmacy, and certain aspects of optical services.

Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG)

A group of GP practices, which working with other healthcare professionals and in partnership with local communities and local authorities, commission NHS services for patients within their local communities.

Endoscopy

A categorisation of diagnostic tests that include; Colonoscopy; Flexi Sigmoidoscopy; Cystoscopy and Gastroscopy.

Imaging

A categorisation of diagnostic tests that include; Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI); Computed Tomography (CT); Non-obstetric Ultrasound; Barium Enema and DEXA Scan.

Median Waiting Time

A measurement of the average time patients have been waiting for a diagnostic test. The median is the middle value when waiting times are put in numerical order. 50% of patients have been waiting less than the median. The median is the preferred measurement of average waiting time as it is less susceptible to extreme values than the mean.

Physiological Measurement

A categorisation of diagnostic tests that include; Audiology Assessments; Echocardiology; Electrophysiology: Peripheral Neurophysiology; Sleep Studies and Urodynamics.

Provider

An organisation that provides NHS treatment or care, for example, an NHS Acute Trust, Mental Health Trust, Community provider, or an Independent Sector organisation.

5.5 Feedback Welcomed

We welcome feedback on the content and presentation of statistics within this report and those published on the NHS England website.

If you have any comments on this, or any other issues regarding these statistics, then please email england.nhsdata@nhs.net

Alternatively, we welcome your comments via our user feedback form [here](#).

Feedback about the user's experiences of using these statistics is available [here](#).

5.6 Consultation

Between 8 February 2018 and 5 April 2018, NHS England and NHS Improvement consulted on the future of the Quarterly Diagnostics Census and Monthly Diagnostics Waiting Times and Activity Returns. The outcome document for the consultation was published 30 October 2019 and confirmed the decision to stop collecting the Quarterly Diagnostics Census on a permanent basis and to continue the monthly diagnostics waiting times and activity return (DM01) in its current form. Find out more at: <https://www.engage.england.nhs.uk/consultation/diagnostics-census-waiting-times-activity-return>

5.7 Additional Information

[Full details of diagnostics data for individual organisations are available here.](#)

For press enquiries please contact the NHS England media team on 0113 825 0958 or 0113 825 0959. Email enquiries should be directed to nhsengland.media@nhs.net

The Government Statistical Service (GSS) statistician responsible for producing these data is:

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